

DCI CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING

INDOCHINA

- I. I would like to turn now to Indochina. This is a term deliberately chosen and one of which I think we should make more use. The situations in Indochina's component parts -- Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos -- obviously have their unique individual aspects, which I will discuss in turn below. But events in each of these countries interrelate in the sense that they are component parts of a single overall struggle. At least that is the way things are regarded in Hanoi. Let us therefore consider first the current view from Hanoi.

Hanoi's Intentions

- II. At this moment, the nine surviving members of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Politburo clearly have several things weighing heavily on their minds.
- A. Despite the steady curtailment of U.S. military strength in Indochina over the past year and the fact that ground combat responsibilities have for

some time been carried almost entirely by the South Vietnamese, there has been no marked or publicly recognizable improvement in Communist military or political fortunes in South Vietnam, or in Laos, or even -- so far -- in Cambodia. Furthermore, North Vietnam itself has been racked in recent weeks by abnormally adverse weather -- typhoons, unusually heavy rains and the worst floods of this century. These weather related adversities have created internal difficulties within North Vietnam and greatly complicated the logistical support of the military forces Hanoi has deployed in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.

B. Hanoi shows clear signs of concern over what it sees as a decline in international and domestic anti-war pressure on the U.S. Government.

1. North Vietnam's leaders seem to have been disappointed by President Nixon's latest troop withdrawal announcement. They apparently expected a faster rate, a larger aggregate number or even a specific terminal date for total disengagement.

- C. The Hanoi leadership is clearly disturbed by President Nixon's impending visits to China and the Soviet Union, especially the former. Perplexed anxiety over what this thaw in Sino-U.S. relations might mean is evident at all levels of the Vietnamese Communist hierarchy. These concerns seem to be particularly bothersome because they are non-specific. They are also nourished by the innate Vietnamese addiction to conspiracy theories. It is not that the Hanoi Politburo or its Vietnamese Communist followers fear Peking, or Moscow, might take concrete steps a, b or c. Instead, what seems to be bothering the North Vietnamese is their concern that there is no telling what the Chinese, or Soviets, might do once they get behind closed doors with the wily, inscrutable Americans.
- D. All of the above factors have complicated Hanoi's play of its propaganda and negotiating hand.
1. One reason why President Nixon's diplomatic moves are galling to Hanoi is that they upstaged the seven point proposal the Vietnamese Communists surfaced at Paris last June.

2. Also, the upstaged seven points had a 31 December 1971 deadline, and the Vietnamese Communists will lose more face if that deadline simply passes without further diplomatic action on their part or ours.
 3. Overall, the U.S. negotiating stance at Paris is probably tougher than Hanoi expected. The Vietnamese Communist delegates are now saying to various sources, including friendly journalists, that they do not expect much from the U.S. side at the talks.
 4. Finally, overt and public events of recent months have not given Hanoi's propagandists much to work with. Given their claims of strength and popular following, the Vietnamese Communists have found particularly embarrassing their inability to disrupt or even noticeably harass this year's Lower House and Presidential elections in South Vietnam.
- E. None of the above means that Hanoi is defeated. Nor does it mean that the determination of North Vietnam's leaders has faltered. Quite the reverse. We expect

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the North Vietnamese to make a determined effort

over the next few months to recover some of the initiative in the struggle, to reverse certain current trends and, overall, to improve the image of their prospects. This effort will doubtless include a mix of propaganda, diplomacy and military action -- and the latter will probably be as intense and dramatic as Hanoi's capabilities permit.

1. In the propaganda field, whatever else it may do, Hanoi will increase its attack on U.S. employment of air power to harass the movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies outside of North Vietnam and to support the activities of local South Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Laotian ground forces resisting North Vietnamese pressure. In this propaganda endeavor, North Vietnam and its cooperating Communist allies seem to be developing an orchestrated effort in which they will try to enlist as much witting or unwitting support as possible among anti-war groups overseas and in the United States.

2. Diplomatically, as I have noted, Hanoi almost has to make some move before 31 December -- either in its own name or through that of its ostensibly southern voice, the "Provisional Revolutionary Government." Any such move will almost certainly involve the prisoner of war issue, which Hanoi regards as a negotiating hole card in dealing with the United States.
3. Hanoi's specific military intentions are difficult to predict, particularly since they will be heavily influenced by Hanoi's -- not our -- assessments of North Vietnam's capabilities, the risks it is willing to run and the price it is willing to pay for the political ends it wants to achieve. Hanoi would obviously like to score psychologically impressive military victories in the Indochina struggle's main arena: South Vietnam. If the Politburo regards this as infeasible, however, North Vietnamese forces may strike hard in Cambodia or Laos, or both. Wherever Hanoi opts to put its weight of effort, its real objectives will not be keyed to real estate or short run tactical considerations. Any major offensives Hanoi initiates over the next several

months will be aimed at the image of the governments of South Vietnam, Cambodia and/or Laos, the morale of their people, and at public and Congressional opinion in the United States.

General Military Developments

III. The concrete evidence so far available on Hanoi's military plans does not point unambiguously in any given direction. Some of it is conflicting and some of it open to several interpretations.

- A. Several months ago, the Communists were telling their troops to expect heavy military action throughout Vietnam during the winter-spring campaign of 1971-1972. More recently, however, there have been fewer indications of such exhortations.
- B. Major efforts were devoted to keeping the Laotian road and trail network in the best possible condition during this summer's rains, efforts of a magnitude suggesting that Hanoi wanted the Ho Chi Minh trail system available for immediate heavy use as soon as the rainy season ended. Until the past few days, however, few supplies or personnel have actually been moved down the trail. This could be a sign of intent or it could be a reflection of the

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unusual severity of Hanoi's recent weather related difficulties.

- C. North Vietnam's draft calls in August were abnormally high, possibly reflecting anticipation of an increased need for cannon fodder in late 1971 or early 1972. If this was the case, however, one would have expected signs of major infiltration activity by late October. There were no such signs in September or October, though we now have evidence that a significant personnel movement down the trail may have just begun.
- D. Within the last few weeks, North Vietnamese air defenses in southern North Vietnam, particularly those associated with the infiltration system, have been markedly intensified, to the point where they are now at their greatest strength ever. This could reflect nothing more than simple prudence. It could also be a sign that Hanoi is contemplating military moves sufficiently intense to entail the risk of major U.S. aerial retaliation against North Vietnamese territory.
- E. In sum, the overall pattern of Hanoi's military behavior suggests a strong and urgent effort to maintain or increase capabilities but does not yet provide concrete clues of near term intentions.

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South Vietnam

IV. I turn now to the specific situation in South Vietnam.

Militarily, Communist performance in South Vietnam over the past several months has been unimpressive. Given the current deployment of Hanoi's forces, near term Communist military capabilities in South Vietnam itself look fairly limited.

A. In the lower part of the country -- Military Regions 3 and 4 -- Communists fortunes in recent months have suffered because Hanoi has kept the four line divisions that used to harass this area -- the 1st, 5th, 7th, and 9th -- deployed and engaged in Cambodia, where they can not provide support or stiffening muscle to Communist activity in South Vietnam.

1. The GVN has exploited the above situation to its considerable advantage, both in consolidating its administrative control over the countryside and rural population and in systematically reducing the base areas Communist forces used to be able to employ as secure redoubts within South Vietnam.

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2. In late September, the Communists attempted to move a two-divisional force from Cambodia into the South Vietnamese border area northwest of Saigon.
 - a. Their intention was to overpower the GVN's forces, score a psychologically significant tactical success and generate insecurity along the traditional approach corridors to Saigon.
 - b. Instead, the Communists took a pasting. With effectively employed air support -- their own as well as ours -- the South Vietnamese inflicted such severe casualties on the invading North Vietnamese that the latter were forced to retreat back to their base areas in Cambodia.
 - c. This fairly dramatic and clear cut ARVN victory noticeably boosted the morale and increased the confidence of South Vietnamese forces. If this action is regarded as a test of Vietnamization, the results were clearly favorable.

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- B. In the highlands of central Vietnam, Communist capabilities are considerably greater. The threat there is most acute in the border region, where the Communists have spent the past few months re-equipping five infantry or artillery regiments. Though the threat is essentially a local one, these augmented Communist forces could menace such regional population centers as Pleiku and Kontum.
- C. The latent North Vietnamese threat is, of course, most acute in the northernmost part of South Vietnam, Military Region 1. Though the situation there is currently stable, in this area the GVN must face the continuing danger of attack by divisions launched from North Vietnam proper.
1. Communist capabilities in this arena have been enhanced by a road on which the Communists have been hard at work that extends from North Vietnam itself, across the western part of the DMZ and down through western Quang Tri Province toward Route 9 and Khe Sanh. This road increases the ease with which Hanoi can deploy troops from sanctuaries in North

Vietnam to combat in the south aimed at,
for example, Quang Tri City or even Hue.

2. The South Vietnamese are well aware of the threats Hanoi can pose in this area and seem well braced to meet them. The GVN also has its own well advanced plans to keep the Communists off balance with pre-emptive probes into enemy base areas along the border.

V. The political scene in South Vietnam has been beset with surface turbulence in recent weeks, but the net result of the past several months' activity seems to have been a marked enhancement of President Thieu's position and effective authority.

A. For a time it looked as if Thieu's handling of the Presidential election might give his various opponents a single issue around which they could coalesce. In the events, however, this did not happen. His opponents were unable or unwilling to unite, even temporarily, enough to give Thieu serious trouble.

1. There was protest, some of it strident, but most of it was concentrated in urban centers. Most of it was also largely vocal.

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Such demonstrations as actually did occur, and they were fairly small, were conducted by militant students and veterans.

2. The groups around Big Minh and Ky, who had hoped to transmute their opposition leadership roles into a new power base, are fast breaking up.

- a. Big Minh has again retired from public activity and no one is rallying to the now out of office Ky.

- B. Whatever foreign observers or domestic critics may think of his actions, the fact is that Thieu at least temporarily is in a much stronger position than he has ever been in before.

1. This fact is well recognized in South Vietnam. Even the opposition Buddhists show signs of becoming more cooperative with the GVN and other groups whose leaders may not like Thieu are nonetheless maneuvering to see if they can join forces with him.

- C. For his part, Thieu is showing more confidence than he has shown before. For example, he has personally announced a series of unpopular but economically necessary reforms to encourage development and

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move South Vietnam along the road to self-sufficiency.

- D. Thieu is not completely out of the woods. Stiff-necked or inept behavior on his part could rekindle latent opposition and generate turbulence capable of becoming serious if further mishandled. But if Thieu avoids major misplays of his now much strengthened hand, he can use his own present position to enhance both the cohesion and the effectiveness of his government in the months ahead.

VI. The biggest short run losers in South Vietnam's recent round of political agitation and activity have been the Communists. They were given a windfall opportunity to fish profitably in temporarily troubled waters. Somewhat surprisingly, they seem to have been unable to do anything of consequence. As I have noted, they were not even able to seriously harass, let alone disrupt, the conduct of either the Lower House or the Presidential elections.

- A. In recent weeks we have seen indications that the Communists are taking rather sober looks at their prospects in South Vietnam and at least privately questioning their capabilities there.

The GVN's track record, especially during a period of extensive U.S. withdrawal, is something Hanoi manifestly finds disquieting.

1. There are numerous signs that the Communists intend to put increased emphasis on rebuilding their heavily damaged, badly disrupted and currently ineffective local infrastructure -- the base on which politically significant future action in South Vietnam's populated areas must depend.